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THE EPSTEIN

Jeffrey Epstein has gone from the Queen's birthday guest list to the sex offenders' register, and from Sandringham to Palm Beach County jail. So how did the billionaire who pleaded guilty to soliciting underage girls lure Prince Andrew and Bill Clinton into his circle, and what was Ghislaine Maxwell's role? **Edward Helmore** on the sex scandal that's gripping London and New York

Xposure. Eyevine. Patrick McMullan. Rob Howarth

'I am not blameless,' said Jeffrey Epstein, the Wall Street money manager, playboy and friend of Bill Clinton, earlier this month after pleading guilty to solicitation, after paying a 14-year-old girl in Florida for a massage with a happy ending. 'Gulliver's playfulness had unintended consequences. That is what happens with wealth. There are unexpected burdens as well as benefits.'

That Epstein, a fixture on the New York circuit of bachelor billionaires, erstwhile companion of Ghislaine Maxwell, daughter of the ill-fated seafaring newspaper proprietor Robert Maxwell, and a man of property, including Manhattan's largest townhouse and a private island in the Virgin Islands, should liken himself to Gulliver is no accident: mismatches of scale are the hallmarks of his rise and abrupt downfall.

Yet until 2005, when friends say he was at least careless – or possibly set up – with the underage visitor to his Palm Beach house, life seemed blessed for the Brooklyn-born man *Vanity Fair* calls 'The Talented Mr Epstein'. Now it seems that his years of relative obscurity at Bear Stearns and as financial advisor to Les Wexner, the 70-year-old founder of The Limited, the US retailing powerhouse that counts Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie & Fitch among its brands, were merely preparation for his publicity-attracting entrance to the society of billionaire singles.

This circle includes Ron Burkle, the notorious California supermarket operator and owner of the private jet that's come to be known as Air F*** One; Steve Bing, the film producer and Elizabeth Hurley paternity provider; and – though neither is a billionaire – Prince Andrew, the Duke of York, and private-jet-hopping, party-boy-in-chief former US president Bill Clinton.

That passage has culminated in lifelong registration as a sex offender and, as *The New York Times* says, establishes Epstein as a 'tabloid monument to this age of hyper-wealth'. The case has shredded Epstein's reputation. Politicians who once sought his contributions have quietly returned them; scientists, including Microsoft's Nathan Myhrvold and artificial-intelligence specialist Marvin Minsky, whom Epstein supported, are bemused; friends have distanced themselves.

Epstein stayed with Prince Andrew at Sandringham and attended the Queen's birthday party at Windsor in 2000 with the Prince. In turn, Prince Andrew accepted Epstein's invitation to go on holiday with him to Thailand, where he was photographed on Johan Eliasch's yacht surrounded by topless women.

Ghislaine Maxwell, 46, too, seems to have drifted out of Epstein's orbit. In New York society, Epstein is best known as having been Ghislaine Maxwell's boyfriend, though friends doubt their relationship went beyond friendship (Ghislaine's father Robert Maxwell and Epstein almost certainly met, leading some to believe that Maxwell left money with Epstein and directed him to look after his children in the event of his death.) Ghislaine first met Epstein in New York in 1991. The romance, if there was any, was short-lived but the friendship remained. An observer, David Patrick Columbia, described them as 'soulmates. It's a nice conventional relationship, →

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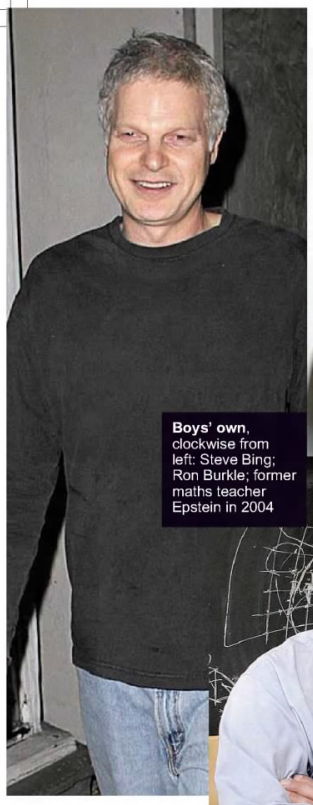

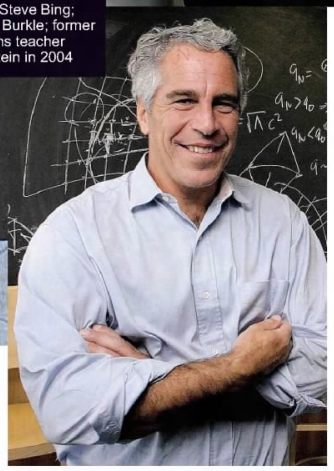

Boys' own, clockwise from left: Steve Bing; Ron Burkle; former maths teacher Epstein in 2004

The Maxwell factor, above: Epstein's friend Ghislaine with her parents Robert and Elizabeth Maxwell, 1992

Clinton and Epstein became friends; Bill described him as a 'committed philanthropist'.

For Epstein, the arrival of Clinton in his circle was the summit of his social achievement. Sjoberg recalled how Epstein liked to name-drop. 'I would be massaging him and he'd be on the phone and then hang up and say, "Oh, that was Cate Blanchett" or "I was on a plane with Clinton".'

Hanging with Clinton is doubtless fun but it attracts attention. As Epstein became more public, so, too, grew curiosity about his wealth and retinue of girls. The *New York Post*'s Page Six ran an item on the trip; *Vanity Fair* commissioned a profile. It went some way in clarifying Epstein's business affairs, suggesting it was a man called Steven Hoffenberg, currently serving 20 years for running a $450 million pyramid scheme, who was his real mentor and raised Epstein's profile to new heights.

Epstein's reaction to the magazine's attention was clumsy. The writer, Vicky Ward, says she was sufficiently unnerved by her subject's threats to 'have a witchdoctor put a curse on your unborn children if I don't like this piece' that she hired security guards for the children in the NICU wards. Their friendship partially restored, Ward offers that 'no one is really sure where the money comes from. It could be Hoffenberg, it could be Wexner, but he doesn't have the kind of investment record you can track. It's odd.'

To Ed Epstein, his friend's fall from grace comes down to bad judgement and bad luck. 'Sometimes people don't grow up. He liked to think of himself as youthful and he liked to surround himself with young women. But because he had a lot of money, people focus on him. If he hadn't the wealth, then people wouldn't have paid any attention to someone who got a massage from a girl who was younger than she said she was.'

According to the Palm Beach police report, Epstein was busted after an 11-month undercover investigation. Acting on a tip-off from a parent of a 14-year-old girl at the local high school, police began watching then 18-year-old Haley Robson, a local community college student, who later said in a statement that she had taken at least six girls, all between the ages of 14 and 16, to visit Epstein. Robson told the girls to say they were 18 if Epstein or his staff asked.

Two of Epstein's former employees told investigators that young-looking girls showed up to perform massages two or three times a day when he was in town and were offered many perks: a chef cooked for them; they were handed hundreds of dollars; some were offered rental cars. One employee said he was told to send a dozen roses to a girl after a high school drama performance. Most of the girls, according to the police, said Epstein masturbated during massages, and a few said he had had sex with them. One woman, named Jane Doe in a civil suit claiming $50 million, alleges that Epstein fondled her and seemed to have an 'obsession with underage minor girls'.

Prosecutors charged him with one count of lewd and lascivious molestation and four counts of unlawful sexual activity with a minor. Some question why Epstein didn't pay off the girls before the case became too public. After all, they'd come for the money, so the terms of the arrangement were essentially in place. Instead, Epstein's lawyers mounted a defence that accused the girls of being 'liars' and the Palm Beach police department of putting on a 'childish performance'.

But matters were soon complicated by a civil lawsuit bought against Epstein by Maximilia Cordero, a male-to-female transgender model, who claims Epstein forced her into a sexual relationship at the age of 16. Cordero has alleged that Epstein requested that she 'return with her 14-, 15- and 16-year-old girlfriends next time'. There was an outcry over what Palm Beach locals felt was a relaxed attitude to Epstein's case on the part of the prosecutor's office – it has taken over six months for a guilty plea to be recorded as Epstein and his lawyers have been negotiating since December 2007 – and the appearance of Nadia Marcinkova, a 25-year-old Yugoslavian model who Epstein boasted was his sex slave. According to an affidavit in the criminal complaint, Marcinkova kept Epstein's underage 'masseuses' busy with lesbian sex, complete with dildos.

Many people comment that there is something almost childlike about Jeffrey Epstein, as if this excuses his wrongdoings. Michael Wolff, the media columnist at *Vanity Fair* who was backed by Epstein in his failed bid to buy *New York magazine*, has nothing but praise for Epstein. 'In terms of business relationships, he's an exemplary example of someone you can count on,' says Wolff, who has come to regard his friend as misunderstood in the rush to portray him as a reprobate. 'People want to damn him as a vulgarian, but I found him to be keenly aware of who he is, why he is. He has a nuanced and complex understanding of the strange position he's crafted for himself. He's full of humour and, in the same way that he's adopted this image bolstered with all his material attributes, he's able to make fun of it.'

Whether he's able to make fun of himself in jail is another matter. 'I respect the legal process,' he said before the chopper lifted off from Little St James. 'I will abide by this.' Epstein admits he has convened a council of friends to alert him to dangerous swerves in behaviour. With friends like his... ■

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Girls, girls, girls, from far left: Johanna Sjoberg was recruited by Ghislaine Maxwell to be Epstein's masseuse; Maximilia Cordero, a male-to-female transgender model who is suing Epstein for distress; Epstein's friend Ghislaine Maxwell. Below, far left: student Haley Robson, who said she took at least six girls to visit Epstein

where they serve each other's purposes.' Ghislaine introduced Epstein to her friend Prince Andrew. And Epstein put her to work in conventional and unconventional ways. She was invited to help design the interiors of new homes in Ohio that Wexner and Epstein were looking to build.

Last year, Johanna Sjoberg, 28, an American brunette, revealed she was recruited by Maxwell to be an errand runner and occasional masseuse. 'Ghislaine asked me, "Do you want to make $100 rubbing feet?"' Epstein paid her college fees and the massages became sexual. Sjoberg also alleged that she was groped by Prince Andrew during one of Epstein's house parties. 'I was groomed for it,' she told the *Daily Mail*. 'I made a pact with the devil in exchange for excitement and glamour. I was hard-up and foolish.'

Yet many of Epstein's friends remain loyal and supportive. 'Jeffrey was generous, and I've never met a woman who didn't like him,' says Ed Epstein (no relation), author of *The Big Picture: The New Logic of Money and Power in Hollywood*. 'The essential thing about Jeffrey is that he's a very bright guy, and that's what people like about him. He doesn't have any pretences. He's not a Citizen Kane character with one secret about him.' In some circles, Epstein offers, his namesake's crime is seen as little more than a lack of judgement. 'His downfall came from indiscretion. It's like Jay Gatsby: you draw attention to yourself if you live a certain way.'

For the next 18 months, Epstein, 55, will forgo the frippery of Manhattan society, the 51,000sq ft Upper East Side townhouse, the Boeing 727 jet, the 7,500-acre ranch near Santa Fe, called Zorro, and the 78-acre Caribbean hideaway with its staff of 70 and its flamingo-stocked tidal pond, to consider events from a Palm Beach County jail cell. For a year after that he'll be under house arrest.

It's bad for Epstein, but not the worst result possible. If he hadn't pleaded guilty to the charges against him under Florida state law, he was about to be charged under federal law with sex tourism, a crime that carries ten years in prison. But it's not the result his defence team, which includes Clinton prosecutor Ken Starr and Alan Dershowitz, the lawyer who overturned the conviction of Claus von Bülow for the attempted murder of his wife Sunny, planned for their client.

'Your body can be confined but not your mind,' Epstein mused to *The New York Times*, before switching his e-mail to 'on vacation' and boarding the helicopter that would deliver him to his incarcerators. To acquaintances left behind, Epstein remains a puzzle. 'He's very enigmatic,' offered Rosa Monckton three years ago. 'You think you know him and then you peel off another ring of the onion skin and there's something else extraordinary underneath. He never reveals his hand.'

There are many more friends who prefer to speak off the record about Epstein than on. 'He's a pretty weird guy. He introduced himself as a treasure hunter,' says one Manhattan business friend who recalls going to his house. 'It was like Fort Knox. There was a Russian girl of about 15 in the waiting room and an ancient waiter in white gloves who served old cucumber sandwiches.'

For years, while Epstein was amassing his fortune managing the wealth of a few billionaires, he was known for his discipline, and the presence of mind that helped him to rise from a middle-class Brooklyn upbringing (his father worked for the Parks Department) to great wealth. On the way, he became a maths professor at Dalton, an elite Manhattan private school, where he began tutoring the son of Bear Stearns chairman Ace Greenberg. Eventually, he landed a job at the famous – but now bust – Wall Street investment house where his career took off. (Epstein took a $57 million hit when Bear Stearns collapsed in March.)

Since 1981, when he left Bear Stearns to found J Epstein & Co, he claims only to accept the money of billionaires to manage. 'I was the only person crazy enough, or arrogant enough, or misplaced enough, to make my limit a billion dollars or more,' he's known to say. With three female executive assistants to organise him around the clock – he called them a 'social prosthesis' – he typically remains largely out of public view. 'He's like a raccoon: sometimes you see him, sometimes you don't,' says one friend. 'He likes to be furtive, so to be in the public eye is really against what he is. When exposure came to him, it came with all the consequences we see before us.'

In Manhattan, Epstein's love of young women appears habitual but unexceptional. 'He's a lot of fun to be with,' said Donald Trump in 2002. 'It is even said that he likes beautiful women as much as I do, and many of them are on the younger side. No doubt about it, Jeffrey enjoys his social life.'

In the mid-2000s, Epstein joined the committees of several New York charities, some of which objected to his casual attire, and his Caribbean island, Little St James (which he tells people has been renamed Little St Jeff), started being used for lavish parties. Then Clinton appeared. The former president, who says he misses Air Force One and travelling by motorcade above all other presidential perks, heard that Epstein had a plane (in fact, he has three: the second being a Gulfstream; the third a Cessna). In 2002 Clinton sent his fixer, Doug Band, to pitch Epstein with the idea that he, Clinton, Ron Burkle, and actors Kevin Spacey and Chris Tucker, fuel up the Boeing for a charity tour of South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Rwanda and Mozambique. →

AN EMPLOYEE WAS TOLD TO SEND A DOZEN ROSES TO A GIRL AFTER A HIGH SCHOOL DRAMA PERFORMANCE

Splashnews.com. Alan Davidson

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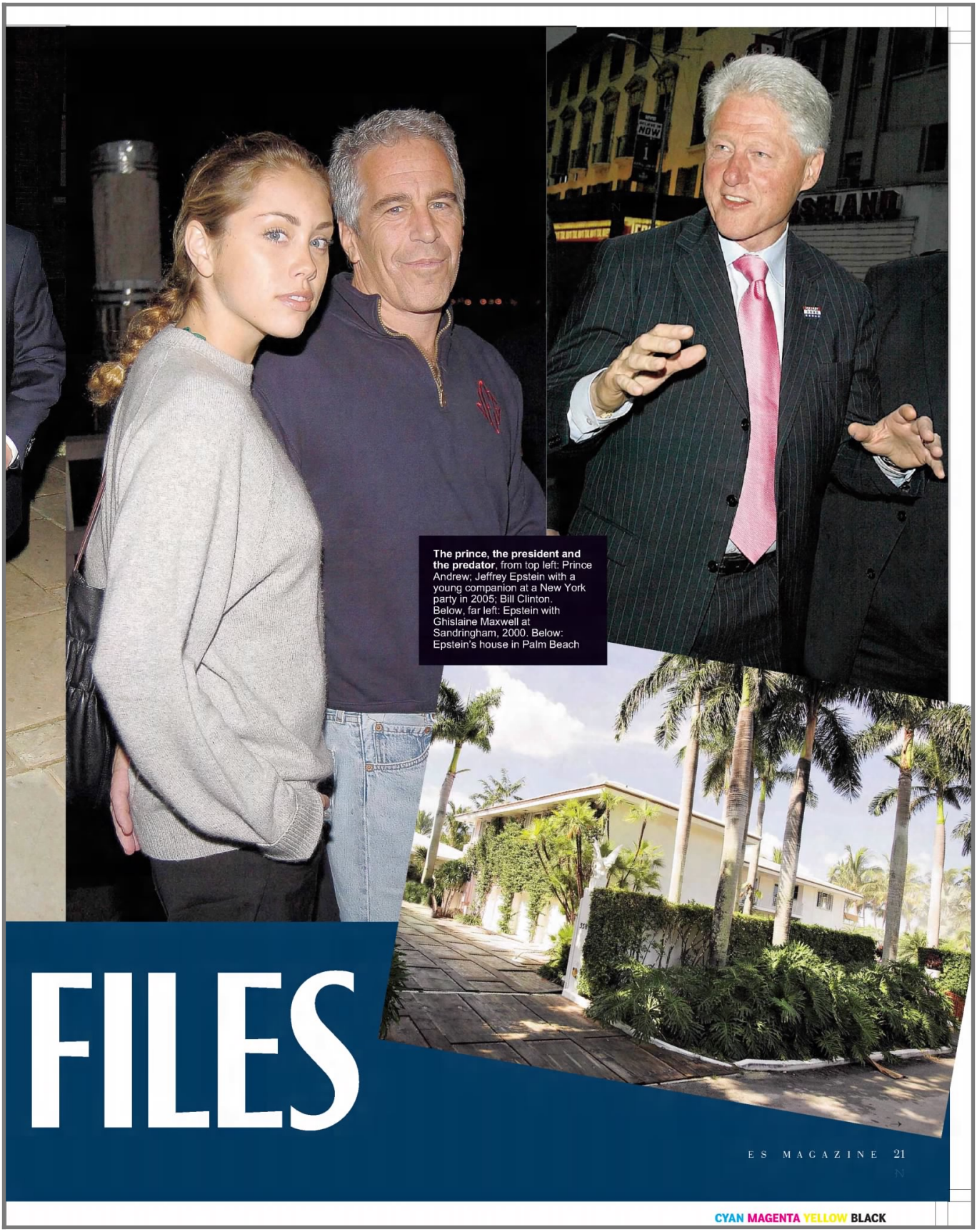

The prince, the president and the predator, from top left: Prince Andrew; Jeffrey Epstein with a young companion at a New York party in 2005; Bill Clinton. Below, far left: Epstein with Ghislaine Maxwell at Sandringham, 2000. Below: Epstein's house in Palm Beach

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